Welcoming All
Creating an Inclusive Church for People with Disabilities

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Shannon Santiesteban

Abstract

This paper explores the theological foundations and practical implications of inclusive ministry toward people with disabilities within the church. Grounded in the biblical doctrine of the imago Dei, it challenges traditional views that see disability as deficiency or punishment, instead affirming disability as a unique and valuable expression of God's creation. Key scriptures such as Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13-16, and John 9:1–3 provide a framework for understanding disability through the lens of divine intentionality and grace. The paper also engages contemporary theological scholarship and disability studies to propose a shift from exclusion and accommodation toward celebration and empowerment. By embracing the full humanity and spiritual capacity of individuals with disabilities, the church can more fully embody the inclusive love of Christ and reflect the diversity of the Kingdom of God.

Shannon Santiesteban

Welcoming All: Creating an Inclusive Church for People with Disabilities

Disability should not be regarded as a flaw or deficiency within God's creation but rather as a distinct and valuable expression of the divine image, or *imago Dei*. Individuals with disabilities are not anomalies in God's design; rather, their presence reveals the depth, diversity, and beauty of the Creator's handiwork. The Genesis creation narrative affirms this theological truth, stating, "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26–27, New International Version). This declaration does not limit God's image to a narrow understanding of physical or mental ability but instead establishes a foundation for recognizing the full humanity of all people, including those with disabilities. Disability, therefore, does not diminish human dignity but instead illuminates a distinctive and sacred facet of God's image—one that the Church is called to acknowledge, honor, and include.

Inclusion in the Church must move beyond mere physical access or compliance with legal mandates. True inclusion is rooted in the theological conviction that individuals with disabilities are indispensable members of both the Church and society. This vision calls for a shift from accommodation to celebration—an intentional move toward affirming the inherent worth of disabled persons as image-bearers of God. In a society that often marginalizes or excludes disabled individuals, the Church is uniquely positioned to be a community of radical welcome, healing, and belonging. This paper presents both a theological and practical framework for congregations seeking to embody this calling. It draws from Scripture, academic discourse on disability theology, and public policy, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), to equip church leaders to foster environments that reflect Christ's inclusive and transformative love.

Shannon Santiesteban

Yet inclusion is not simply about sentiment; it is also about confronting ableism—the systemic bias that devalues and discriminates against people with disabilities. Activist and speaker Carson Tueller (2022) offers a poignant critique of performative inclusion, noting that ableism often appears in the form of calling disabled people "inspiring" for enduring systems built to exclude them, while doing nothing to change those systems. This superficial admiration fails to challenge the root structures of inequality. Furthermore, the lived experiences of individuals with chronic and dynamic disabilities, such as fibromyalgia, underscore the urgent need for greater awareness and compassion. As Delwo (2022) describes, fibromyalgia can transform someone who is educated, ambitious, and energetic into a person unable to work, clean, exercise, think clearly, or feel awake. These realities demand that churches reexamine their assumptions about productivity, strength, and worth, aligning themselves with a biblical vision that values every member, regardless of ability.

Disability and Divine Design: A Biological Example

The theological conviction that all people are made in the image of God is foundational to a Christian understanding of human worth and dignity. Genesis 1:27 declares, "So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (New International Version). This verse affirms that every human being, regardless of physical or cognitive ability, reflects the divine image (imago Dei). The implication is clear: human value is not determined by productivity, intelligence, or physical prowess, but by being created by and for God.

Shannon Santiesteban

Psalm 139 further reinforces this truth. The psalmist writes, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb... I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Psalm 139:13–14, NIV). This passage speaks to the intentionality and care with which God forms each person. It leaves no room for exclusion or devaluation based on perceived limitations. Indeed, each body—whether disabled or nondisabled—is an expression of divine craftsmanship.

The New Testament also contributes to this theological vision. In John 9:1–3, Jesus encounters a man who had been blind since birth. His disciples, echoing a common cultural assumption, ask whether the man’s condition was the result of sin. Jesus corrects their understanding, saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3, NIV). Jesus reframes disability not as punishment or deficiency, but as a context through which God’s presence and power can be revealed. This teaching is pivotal for understanding the role of disability within the church: it is not a problem to be solved, but a dimension of human existence through which God can be glorified.

To further illuminate how perceived limitations can be sources of strength, one might consider the biological example of sickle cell disease. This genetic condition, caused by a mutation in the hemoglobin gene, alters the shape and function of red blood cells. Individuals who inherit two copies of the mutated gene—one from each parent—develop sickle cell disease, which presents significant medical challenges. However, individuals who inherit only one copy of the gene, known as sickle cell trait, generally maintain good health and benefit from a remarkable biological advantage: resistance to malaria. In regions such as sub-Saharan Africa,

Shannon Santiesteban

the Mediterranean, and parts of India, where malaria is widespread, this genetic trait has a clear survival benefit (Kwiatkowski, 2005; Weatherall, 2001).

This phenomenon offers a compelling analogy for how God can work through what might be seen as weakness or imperfection. A genetic mutation that can cause suffering in one context serves as a life-saving adaptation in another. Similarly, God's purposes often emerge in ways that defy cultural expectations and medical norms. The Apostle Paul echoes this mystery when he records the words of Christ: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV). In both biology and theology, limitation can become a site of grace, resilience, and strength.

The church, when it recognizes and honors this dynamic, becomes a fuller reflection of the body of Christ. Inclusion of people with disabilities is not an act of charity but a recognition of mutual dependence and shared dignity. As 1 Corinthians 12:22–24 reminds us, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable," and they are to be treated with greater honor. In this light, disability is not a deviation from the norm, but part of the richness of God's created order. The challenge for the church is to reshape its understanding of strength, beauty, and worth—not in conformity to cultural ideals, but in alignment with the gospel of Christ.

Thus, the image of God is not diminished by disability; it is made visible through it. Both scripture and science invite us to see difference not as deficiency, but as divine design. When churches embrace this vision, they not only fulfill their biblical mandate, but also testify to the transformative power of grace made visible in every body.

Shannon Santiesteban

Theological Foundations: The Imago Dei and Human Dignity

The doctrine of the imago Dei is central to both Jewish and Christian theology and affirms the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being (Grenz, 2001). Genesis 1:27 clearly articulates that all humanity bears the divine image, which is not contingent on physical, cognitive, or functional ability. Thus, disability cannot diminish a person's image-bearing capacity. This doctrine challenges any cultural or theological narratives that devalue individuals based on differences in ability.

Psalm 139:13–16 provides further insight into God's intimate and intentional creation of each person. The psalmist's recognition that God "knit me together in my mother's womb" (v. 13) underscores the intentionality behind every human life, including those with disabilities. These individuals are not accidents or afterthoughts; rather, they are deliberate expressions of God's creative will (Fee, 1994). Their worth does not depend on societal norms of functionality or productivity but rests on their identity as beloved creations.

Contemporary theologians, such as Amos Yong (2011), have argued that people with disabilities uniquely reveal the breadth of God's image, challenging dominant ableist assumptions. Yong's pneumatological approach emphasizes that the Spirit of God works fully and powerfully through people with disabilities, calling the church to celebrate their contributions rather than merely accommodate their needs. The imago Dei is neither partial nor fragmented in individuals with disabilities; it remains complete and vibrant, inviting the church into deeper communion with the diversity of God's creation.

Shannon Santiesteban

Jesus and the Redefinition of Disability

The ministry of Jesus Christ redefines disability in profound ways. In John 9:1–3, Jesus refutes the prevailing cultural assumption that disability is a consequence of sin. Instead, He reframes disability as an opportunity for God's glory to be revealed through healing, resilience, and divine purpose (Swinton, 2012). This theological reframing shifts the focus from judgment to grace and from exclusion to inclusion.

Jesus' interactions with people who were blind, lame, deaf, or mentally unwell demonstrate an affirmation of their full humanity and dignity (Marshall, 2004). For example, His command in Luke 14:13 to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" to feasts highlights the centrality of marginalized individuals within the kingdom of God (Luke 14:13, NIV). Theologian Nancy Eiesland (1994) further suggests that the resurrected Christ, bearing the marks of His wounds (John 20:27), embodies a "disabled God," inviting a reimagining of wholeness that includes suffering and vulnerability.

Thomas Reynolds (2012) advances the view that the church must embrace interdependence rather than idealizing independence. Disability is not simply a problem to be fixed but a vital dimension of human diversity that calls the Christian community to mutual care and solidarity. This Christ-centered model moves beyond healing as the ultimate goal toward belonging as the fundamental expression of Christian life.

Shannon Santiesteban

Historical and Academic Perspectives

Historically, attitudes toward disability have fluctuated between compassion and exclusion. Ancient and medieval views often interpreted disability as evidence of sin or divine disfavor (Swinton, 2000). However, modern disability studies have challenged these interpretations through the development of the social model of disability, which distinguishes between impairment and the social barriers that disable individuals (Oliver, 1990). This model resonates with Christian calls to justice and hospitality, emphasizing the removal of physical and attitudinal obstacles to full participation.

Jean Vanier (1998), founder of the L'Arche communities, has demonstrated that intentional inclusion of people with disabilities fosters grace, compassion, and mutual transformation. In *Becoming Human*, Vanier writes that individuals with disabilities teach the church how to love unconditionally, embodying the gospel in ways intellectual theology alone cannot capture. These insights underscore the necessity for churches to engage deeply with both theological and academic perspectives on disability.

Embracing the Whole Body of Christ

The inclusion of people with disabilities is not optional but essential to the health and mission of the church. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:22, "the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (NIV). This metaphor underscores the radical theological claim that every member of the body of Christ is necessary for its wholeness and vitality.

Inclusion is therefore an act of justice and faithfulness to God's design. People with disabilities bring unique gifts and perspectives that enrich the entire community. When the

Shannon Santiesteban

church affirms the full humanity and spiritual capacity of all believers, it more accurately reflects the kingdom of God—a community where every person is seen, valued, and loved.

Going forward, the church must cultivate environments that extend beyond physical accessibility to embody relational, theological, and spiritual hospitality. Leaders must understand disability not as a deficit but as a vital aspect of divine diversity. By doing so, the church fulfills its calling to love as Christ loves and to recognize the imago Dei in every face.

Building upon the theological foundation established in Chapter 1—that every person is created in the image of God regardless of ability—it is essential to examine how these truths have been reflected throughout history. The experiences of people with disabilities within society and the Church reveal a complex interplay between inclusion and exclusion, compassion and marginalization.

Historically, disability has often been misunderstood and stigmatized across cultures. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, physical impairments were frequently regarded as signs of divine punishment or natural defects. Philosophers such as Aristotle endorsed the practice of infanticide for infants born with disabilities, and Roman law allowed abandonment of those deemed unfit (Stark, 1996). These harsh societal attitudes equated physical perfection with human worth, leaving little room for compassion or inclusion.

Some ancient societies, like those of Mesopotamia and Egypt, displayed more nuanced attitudes, occasionally including individuals with disabilities in certain social roles, such as

Shannon Santiesteban

artisans or servants within royal courts (Hersh & Johnson, 2008). Yet, such inclusion was often symbolic or utilitarian, rather than a true acknowledgment of inherent dignity.

With the rise of Christianity, new moral and theological frameworks emerged that emphasized care for the vulnerable and sanctity of life. Monastic communities began establishing hospitals and shelters for the sick and disabled (Eiesland, 1994). Nevertheless, this care frequently took the form of segregation in asylums or poorhouses, and disability was often interpreted as divine punishment or spiritual failing. Medieval cathedrals and church buildings were typically constructed without consideration for accessibility, further marginalizing those with mobility or sensory impairments.

The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution ushered in scientific and medical classifications that often intensified exclusion. The eugenics movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries promoted sterilization and institutionalization of people with disabilities (Longmore, 2003). Discriminatory laws such as the American “ugly laws” criminalized the public presence of visibly disabled individuals, reinforcing social stigma and exclusion (Linton, 1998).

Within the Church, exclusion was both physical and theological. Worship spaces were inaccessible; liturgies relied heavily on spoken word without alternative communication; leadership roles were rarely open to persons with disabilities. The theological framing of disability as brokenness or sin led to a focus on miraculous healing as the only route to acceptance, thereby perpetuating ableism under the guise of faith (Yong, 2011). The Church

Shannon Santiesteban

often offered charity to disabled individuals, but this maintained a power dynamic that limited full participation and leadership.

Contrasting this trajectory, the early Christian movement modeled radical hospitality and inclusion. Amid a culture that marginalized and discarded the disabled, early Christians distinguished themselves by caring for the sick and vulnerable, even during times of plague and persecution (Stark, 1996). Rooted in the belief that all humans bear God's image and following Christ's command to love the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40), early Christian communities practiced mutual aid, sharing resources and embracing interdependence (1 Corinthians 12:22). Jesus' ministry likewise affirmed the dignity of those marginalized by disability—not merely healing them but restoring their social and spiritual belonging (Marshall, 2004). However, as Christianity became institutionalized and aligned with empire, this radical inclusivity diminished. The Church increasingly mirrored societal norms, segregating persons with disabilities and neglecting accessibility (Swinton, 2000).

The mid-20th century marked a turning point, influenced by global events and social movements. The return of injured veterans after World War II, alongside the rise of civil rights activism, provided momentum for disability advocacy. Landmark legislation such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 challenged societal barriers and promoted access and equality (Blanck, 2007).
These advances corresponded with a paradigm shift from the medical model—which pathologized disability—to the social model that identifies societal barriers as disabling factors

Shannon Santiesteban

(Oliver, 1990). This shift has profound implications for the Church, urging a move from viewing disability as a personal deficit to a justice issue demanding full inclusion.

Contemporary disability theologians, including Nancy Eiesland, John Swinton, and Amos Yong, have further reshaped ecclesial understandings by emphasizing the sacredness of disabled bodies and the call to communal interdependence (Eiesland, 1994; Swinton, 2012; Yong, 2011). Their work invites faith communities to embrace diverse embodiments as integral to the Body of Christ.

Today, the Church is called to transition from acts of charity to systemic justice, ensuring accessibility, representation, and theological affirmation. Accountability in inclusion reflects faithfulness to the image of God in every person and embodies the transformative witness Christ envisions.

Building on the theological foundation of imago Dei and the historical journey outlined previously, this chapter turns to Scripture's direct mandate for inclusive ministry within the Church. Inclusive ministry is not an optional add-on; it is central to biblical faith and the nature of the Kingdom of God. Key New Testament passages provide a compelling biblical case for intentionally welcoming and prioritizing individuals with disabilities.

Shannon Santiesteban

Luke 14:12–14 — Prioritizing the Marginalized

In the parable shared at the house of a Pharisee, Jesus directly challenges prevailing social customs by instructing His host not to invite friends, relatives, or affluent neighbors—those who could easily reciprocate—but rather to extend hospitality to "the poor, the

crippled, the lame, the blind" (Luke 14:13, New International Version). This radical teaching deconstructs transactional hospitality and reorients the values of the kingdom of God, urging the Church to prioritize those often excluded or devalued by society (The Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011). Jesus' command highlights a generosity rooted in divine justice and eschatological hope rather than earthly reciprocity, assuring that those who obey "will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14). This reframes the Church's mission, moving it beyond convenience or comfort toward active, inclusive engagement with those on the margins (DeLorenzo, 2017).

Including the marginalized—both in biblical times and in contemporary contexts—demonstrates a core characteristic of God's kingdom: radical welcome. Throughout Scripture, God consistently aligns with the vulnerable, including the widow, orphan, foreigner, and person with a disability (Deuteronomy 10:18; Isaiah 1:17). In today's world, these parallels persist in the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, those experiencing poverty, and others who encounter systemic barriers to full participation in community and worship. The modern Church is thus called not only to remove architectural and attitudinal barriers but to actively reimagine its ministries, leadership, and mission statements to reflect the inclusive heart of Christ. As Eiesland (1994) asserts, the disabled body is not outside the Church's mission but central to understanding God's presence and grace. Inclusion becomes not a charitable gesture, but a theological imperative—affirming that all people, regardless of ability or social status, are indispensable to the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:22–26).

Shannon Santiesteban

1 Corinthians 12:22–26 — All Members Are Indispensable

The Apostle Paul's metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ, found in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, provides one of the most powerful theological foundations for disability inclusion. Within this passage, Paul asserts that "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22, New International Version [NIV]). This statement directly challenges social hierarchies and ableist assumptions that often undervalue individuals with physical, cognitive, or mental disabilities. Paul goes further to declare that the parts "we think are less honorable we treat with special honor, and the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty" (v. 23). These declarations subvert the norms of both ancient and contemporary cultures, where the value of individuals is frequently measured by utility, appearance, or productivity.

The language Paul uses—"weaker," "less honorable," and "unpresentable"—has often been associated by interpreters with members of the community who were marginalized, vulnerable, or overlooked, including those with physical limitations or social stigma (Wright, 2010). However, Paul does not suggest that these individuals are merely to be tolerated or passively included. Instead, he elevates their status, emphasizing that their presence and contributions are essential to the health and flourishing of the entire community. The body cannot function without all its parts, and in God's design, those deemed "weaker" by human standards possess a unique and irreplaceable role in the body of Christ.

This metaphor carries significant implications for how churches understand ministry and participation. Recognizing the unique gifts of all members—including those with disabilities—calls for a reimagining of traditional structures. Churches are invited to move

Shannon Santiesteban

beyond models of charity or paternalism toward a vision of mutuality and shared belonging. This reimagining may involve adapting worship spaces for physical accessibility, offering sensory-friendly services, utilizing inclusive language, or restructuring leadership models to ensure that people with disabilities are not just recipients of ministry but active participants and decision-makers.

Moreover, Paul's claim that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26, NIV) speaks to the profound interdependence within the church. This verse articulates a communal ethic of compassion, responsibility, and solidarity. When people with disabilities are excluded—whether through physical barriers, social stigma, or theological neglect—the entire community is impoverished. Conversely, when the gifts of all members are recognized and celebrated, the whole body is strengthened. The church, then, is not a collection of isolated individuals or homogeneous groups, but a deeply connected body in which the flourishing of each member contributes to the well-being of the whole (Bassett, 2015).

In light of this theology, disability should not be seen as a deficit that limits participation but as an aspect of human diversity through which God reveals his wisdom and grace. The Body of Christ becomes more complete, more compassionate, and more reflective of the Kingdom of God when it honors every member, especially those whom the world deems less valuable. The church's task is not merely to make room for people with disabilities but to recognize that without them, the body is incomplete.

Shannon Santiesteban

Matthew 25:40 — Serving the Least Is Serving Christ

Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats teaches that acts of compassion toward "the least of these" are acts of service to Christ Himself (Matt. 25:40, NIV). This identification elevates ministry to people with disabilities beyond charity to sacred worship and obedience (Olson, 2007).

This passage challenges the Church to evaluate whether its ministry practices reflect Christ's presence among the marginalized. Inclusion, hospitality, and advocacy are not optional; they are intrinsic to faithful discipleship and have eternal significance.

Building on the theological foundation of imago Dei and the historical journey explored earlier, this chapter turns to Scripture's direct mandate for inclusive ministry within the Church. Inclusive ministry is not an optional addition to Christian practice but is central to biblical faith and the very nature of the Kingdom of God. Several key New Testament passages provide a compelling biblical foundation for intentionally welcoming and prioritizing individuals with disabilities.

In Luke 14:12–14, Jesus challenges the social customs of His time during a meal at a Pharisee's home. Instead of encouraging hospitality toward friends, family, or wealthy neighbors who could repay favors, Jesus instructs His host to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (Luke 14:13, NIV). This teaching radically disrupts the transactional nature of social relationships by elevating marginalized individuals as primary guests. Jesus promises that such hospitality will be rewarded "at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14), reframing the motivation for inclusion away from earthly gain to obedience to God and eternal recompense. For contemporary churches, this parable calls for more than mere physical accessibility; it

Shannon Santiesteban

demands an intentional and active pursuit to remove barriers—whether physical, social, or attitudinal to offer genuine welcome to those whom society often overlooks (DeLorenzo, 2017).

Paul's metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ further grounds this call to inclusion in 1 Corinthians 12:22–26. Here, Paul insists that the "weaker" or "less honorable" parts of the body—commonly understood to include people with disabilities—are not only indispensable but deserving of "special honor" and "special modesty" (1 Cor. 12:22–23, NIV). This passage challenges cultural ableism by affirming the essential contributions, dignity, and unique gifts of all members of the Church. It encourages communities of faith to adapt ministries, worship practices, and leadership structures to ensure full participation and honor for all. Paul's teaching that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Cor. 12:26) underscores the mutual responsibility within the body of Christ, making clear that the exclusion or neglect of any member diminishes the whole community (Bassett, 2015).

The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25:40 completes this scriptural foundation by identifying acts of compassion toward "the least of these" as acts done directly to Christ Himself (Matt. 25:40, NIV). This passage elevates ministry to people with disabilities beyond charitable work to a sacred form of worship and obedience. It powerfully challenges the Church to examine how its ministry structures, teachings, hospitality, and physical environments reflect Christ's presence among the vulnerable and marginalized. Inclusion, therefore, is not optional but intrinsic to faithful discipleship and carries eternal significance (Olson, 2007).

Taken together, these passages provide a robust biblical mandate for fully inclusive ministry. Jesus' call to prioritize the marginalized is a divine command, foundational to the Kingdom of God and demanding intentional, active inclusion that transcends mere physical

Shannon Santiesteban

access to embrace full social and spiritual participation. The indispensability of all members affirms that every person, regardless of ability, contributes gifts vital to the Church's wholeness and vitality. Finally, the identification of ministry to people with disabilities as ministry to Christ Himself elevates inclusion from a specialized ministry or charitable endeavor to a core expression of love and obedience to Jesus.

These biblical truths challenge the Church to embody radical hospitality, honor every member with dignity and respect, and serve those on the margins as if serving Christ personally. Embracing this mandate leads to building not just accessible churches but holy communities that truly reflect the heart of God.

In the biblical texts examined here converge to affirm that inclusive ministry is an essential expression of the Church's identity and mission. Jesus' teachings call believers to actively seek out and prioritize those marginalized by society, especially people with disabilities, recognizing them as valuable members of the Body of Christ. Paul's metaphor underscores the indispensability of every member and the interconnectedness that requires honoring and including all gifts and experiences. Finally, Matthew's gospel challenges the Church to understand ministry to the vulnerable as ministry to Christ Himself, infusing inclusion with profound spiritual significance. As the Church embraces this biblical mandate, it is called to move beyond mere accommodation toward full participation and justice, embodying the radical hospitality of the Kingdom. The next chapter will explore theological and practical frameworks that can help faith communities live out these scriptural truths in transformative ways.

Shannon Santiesteban

Understanding Disability Today

To create a church environment that truly reflects the heart of Christ, it is vital to understand the realities of disability in the contemporary world. Disability encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences, including visible physical impairments, fluctuating dynamic conditions, neurodiversity, and chronic illnesses. Traditional views of disability as solely a medical issue or spiritual burden are insufficient. Instead, churches must adopt broader frameworks grounded in justice, dignity, and biblical theology.

Physical disability refers to impairments that affect mobility, dexterity, or physical functioning. These conditions—such as paralysis, amputation, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and muscular dystrophy—are often visible and can lead to assumptions about cognitive or emotional capacities. In church settings, physical disabilities necessitate serious attention to accessibility, including ramps, accessible restrooms, and seating, while challenging congregations to avoid pity-based attitudes and foster relationships rooted in mutual respect and justice (Hardwick, 2021).

Dynamic disabilities are characterized by fluctuating severity and are often invisible to others, leading to frequent misunderstanding and social stigma. Conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS), epilepsy, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fibromyalgia, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) exemplify this category. Individuals with these diagnoses may demonstrate full participation one day and be incapacitated the next due to unpredictable symptom patterns. This unpredictability often gives rise to skepticism and unfair judgment within social and religious communities. For example, fibromyalgia includes at least seven distinct types of pain: hyperalgesia (increased sensitivity to pain), widespread muscle

Shannon Santiesteban

pain, temporomandibular joint (TMJ) pain, allodynia (pain from non-painful stimuli), neuropathic pain, chronic headache, and abdominal or pelvic pain. Recognizing the scope of these symptoms is essential for understanding the daily challenges faced by individuals with this condition.

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), another dynamic illness, can be triggered by environmental stimuli such as ultraviolet radiation from fluorescent and halogen light bulbs, which may provoke flares in photosensitive individuals. In the case of chronic pain more broadly, the World Health Organization (WHO) now classifies it as a disease in its own right, distinguishing between chronic primary pain and chronic secondary pain. Since 2018, fibromyalgia has been officially recognized under the chronic primary pain category, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of this condition and reinforcing the need for its inclusion in comprehensive care and accommodation models.

These realities challenge churches to become grace-centered communities that accommodate shifting energy levels and fluctuating cognitive or physical capacities. Rather than questioning the legitimacy of someone's experience, congregations should cultivate a spirit of empathy and understanding. Jesus' ministry offers a theological model for such inclusion. His compassionate engagement with individuals suffering from chronic, invisible, or variable conditions affirms the inherent worth of every person, regardless of perceived health or productivity. By reflecting Christ's inclusive love, churches can become places of hospitality, dignity, and spiritual refuge for individuals with dynamic disabilities (Brock, 2016).

Neurodiversity recognizes neurological differences—including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette's syndrome, and dyslexia—as

Shannon Santiesteban

natural variations rather than deficits to be "cured." These differences affect communication, learning, and social interaction and are often misunderstood in traditional church environments. Churches must embrace neurodiversity by creating sensory-friendly spaces, offering visual supports, and honoring diverse communication styles. This approach aligns with biblical teachings about the Body of Christ's diversity, where each member's gifts contribute uniquely to the whole (1 Corinthians 12:12–26, New International Version).

Chronic illness encompasses long-term health conditions that may not be curable but can be managed, such as diabetes, heart disease, lupus, and autoimmune disorders. Chronic illnesses often overlap with dynamic and invisible disabilities, bringing symptoms like fatigue and pain that affect daily life and church involvement. Practical support, emotional care, and recognition of the grief associated with chronic illness are essential ministries. The church is called to be a place where those who suffer are met with compassion and solidarity, embodying God's nearness to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18, New International Version).

Understanding disability today requires moving beyond the traditional medical model, which views disability as a defect or sickness located within the individual. This model often reduces people to their impairments and encourages dependency or pity. Historically, churches have reflected this model by focusing mainly on healing prayers or treating people with disabilities as objects of charity rather than full participants in the faith community (Hardwick, 2021).

In contrast, the social model shifts focus from individual impairment to the barriers created by society—whether physical, attitudinal, or organizational—that disable people. Disability is understood as the result of an inaccessible world, not the individual's condition.

Shannon Santiesteban

Churches are called to examine worship services, leadership opportunities, and programming for accessibility and inclusivity. Justice, as called for in Scripture, demands the removal of barriers and the creation of environments where all can participate fully (Micah 6:8, New International Version).

Building upon the social model, the theological model of disability roots inclusion firmly in biblical truth. Disability is embraced as part of human diversity, a reflection of the *imago Dei*, through which God's glory and wisdom are revealed. This model rejects ableism as sin and recognizes that God often works through and within disability rather than simply healing or eradicating it. The man born blind in John 9 and Paul's "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12 exemplify how disability can reveal God's power and grace. The theological model calls the church not just to remove barriers but to actively seek, welcome, affirm, and empower people with disabilities as essential members and ministers within the Body of Christ (Brock, 2016).

By adopting this fuller, biblically informed understanding of disability—one that includes physical, dynamic, neurodiverse, and chronic experiences—churches can move from accommodation to transformation. Listening to people with lived experience and integrating inclusive practices enables faith communities to embody the Kingdom of God as places where every person, regardless of ability, is honored, empowered, and celebrated.

ADA Laws and Accessibility: Legal Foundations

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990 and amended in 2008, is a landmark civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities across public life, including employment, education, transportation, and access to places open to the public. The ADA affirmed that disability rights are civil rights, ensuring equal opportunities and

Shannon Santiesteban

protections for people with physical and mental impairments that substantially limit major life activities (ADA National Network, n.d.). The 2008 amendments broadened the definition of disability to include more conditions and clarified that mitigating measures such as medication or assistive devices do not exclude individuals from protection. This expanded coverage is particularly significant for individuals with dynamic or invisible disabilities (ADA National Network, n.d.).

Title III of the ADA addresses public accommodations and services operated by private entities, requiring removal of architectural barriers where readily achievable and provision of effective communication access. However, religious organizations are exempt from Title III requirements concerning their places of worship (ADA National Network, n.d.). This exemption raises important ethical and theological questions: Should churches be content with minimal legal compliance, or should they proactively create inclusive environments that welcome all?

Universal design offers a proactive framework for inclusion. It involves designing buildings, products, and environments usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without need for adaptation or specialized design (Reynolds, 2011). Although not legally mandated for churches, applying universal design principles—such as step-free access, accessible restrooms, large-print materials, and assistive listening devices—demonstrates a church's commitment to dignity and hospitality (Day & Eiesland, 2008). Voluntary compliance with ADA principles exemplifies the Church's calling to serve marginalized populations, shifting the perspective from "What must we do?" to "How can we best welcome all of God's people?"

Shannon Santiesteban

ADA as a Justice Issue Rooted in Biblical Care for the Marginalized

Justice for the marginalized is a persistent theme in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The prophets urge the pursuit of justice and defense of the oppressed (Isaiah 1:17, New International Version), and Jesus's ministry prioritizes those excluded from society, such as lepers, the blind, and the poor (Luke 14:13–14, NIV). Accessibility transcends legal compliance; it embodies living out the Gospel's call to inclusion and love. Disability theologians assert that architectural, communicational, or attitudinal barriers that exclude people with disabilities reflect a failure to model Christ's inclusive love (Day & Eiesland, 2008).

Legal Does Not Equal Ethical: Going Beyond the Law to Show Love

Though churches are legally exempt from some ADA provisions, Christian ethics call for a higher standard grounded in the law of love (John 13:34, NIV). Meeting only the minimum legal requirements falls short of Christ's call to radical hospitality. Churches should consider actions such as installing ramps and elevators even when not legally required, providing sign language interpretation, captioning, large-print materials, training staff in disability etiquette, and soliciting feedback from disabled members to enhance access (Reynolds, 2011). This ethos challenges congregations to ask not how little they must do, but how fully they can embody welcome and care.

The Importance of the Built Environment and Communication Access

Physical accessibility is foundational to participation. Barriers such as narrow doorways, inaccessible restrooms, lack of reserved wheelchair seating, poor acoustics, and heavy doors without automatic openers can exclude people with disabilities from worship and fellowship.

Shannon Santiesteban

Communication access is equally vital for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or neurodivergent. Providing captioning, real-time transcription, braille or large-print bulletins, visual cues, and quiet spaces for sensory sensitivities ensures dignity and full participation. In the digital age, accessibility also extends to church websites, livestream services, and digital materials, requiring attention to design elements like high-contrast fonts, alt-text for images, and keyboard navigability (ADA National Network, n.d.).

Embracing Disability as a Theological Gift

Disability is not a deviation from divine design but a reflection of the diversity and richness of God's creation. Rather than viewing disability through a lens of deficiency, theological reflection challenges the church to embrace disability as a gift—both spiritual and communal. This chapter explores three interconnected dimensions: disability as part of God's creative diversity, the spiritual insight gained from the disabled body and experience, and the theological necessity of interdependence over independence.

Disability as Part of the Diversity of God's Creation

Disability often evokes societal responses centered around fixing, curing, or avoiding discomfort. Yet, the Genesis creation narrative asserts that all human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27, New Revised Standard Version), a declaration not limited by physical or cognitive conditions. Psalm 139:13–16 further affirms the intentionality and intimacy of divine creation, stating, "You knit me together in my mother's womb… I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (NRSV). These scriptures offer a foundational theological claim: disability is not a divine error but an expression of sacred design.

Shannon Santiesteban

Nancy Eiesland's (1994) seminal work, *The Disabled God*, reframes disability in theological discourse by suggesting that Christ's resurrected body—retaining the wounds of crucifixion—symbolizes divine solidarity with disabled bodies. Eiesland argues, "In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God" (p. 98). Her argument invites the church to encounter disability not as a problem to be solved but as a site of revelation and incarnation.

Rather than marginalizing disability, the church is called to recognize the disabled person as a bearer of God's image. Disability becomes a mirror that reflects not weakness or inadequacy but the multifaceted nature of divine creativity. This theological orientation disrupts ableist assumptions and positions the church to be a community of radical welcome and affirmation. It also affirms the full humanity and ministerial capacity of disabled persons, not as exceptions but as essential members of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:22–26).

Learning from the Disabled Body and Experience

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the church as one body with many parts, each indispensable to the whole. The text emphasizes that "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (v. 22, NRSV). This metaphor affirms the theological necessity of diverse embodiments, including those shaped by disability. The disabled body resists cultural ideals of strength and perfection and invites the church to reconsider the criteria by which value and holiness are measured.

Theological reflection shaped by the lived experience of disability reveals a deeper understanding of suffering, grace, and community. Scholars such as Thomas Reynolds (2008)

Shannon Santiesteban

emphasize that disability disrupts normative expectations and opens space for theological growth. He writes, “The challenge of disability is not to fix what is broken, but to accept and affirm the fullness of humanity” (p. 113). Lived experiences of disability often cultivate spiritual virtues such as patience, hope, endurance, and intercessory care—gifts that enrich the entire body of Christ.

Moreover, persons with disabilities frequently engage faith and theology in profoundly embodied ways. Worship practices that incorporate multiple senses—visual, tactile, auditory—expand the church’s liturgical imagination. Faith expressions that emerge from cognitive or communicative diversity also offer authentic testimony to God’s presence and grace. As Hans Reinders (2011) notes, “Theologically, persons with disabilities challenge the church to move beyond abstract doctrinal formulations to a lived and embodied spirituality” (p. 148).

Listening to disabled voices encourages congregations to rethink participation and leadership, affirming those who might otherwise be excluded. By integrating these perspectives into theological education, preaching, and ministry, the church grows in compassion and authenticity, learning not just about disability but from it.

Interdependence Over Independence

A theology of disability calls the church to embrace interdependence as a core value of Christian life. Western culture frequently elevates independence as the ideal of human maturity and worth, but Scripture offers a different model. Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 12:9 speak directly to this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (NRSV). Here, weakness is not a deficiency but the space in which divine grace is most fully manifest.

Shannon Santiesteban

The early Christian communities described in Acts 2:42–47 and Romans 12:4–5 exemplify shared life, mutual care, and relational strength. These models of interdependence suggest that the church is at its strongest when it honors need as well as contribution. Disability makes visible the truth that all people, regardless of ability, are vulnerable, reliant, and in need of God and one another.

This interdependence is not a burden but a theological gift. It reveals the church as a dynamic, grace-filled body where each member's presence is necessary. Disabled individuals often embody and teach this reality, not only by requiring assistance but by offering wisdom, leadership, hospitality, and spiritual insight. As Swinton (2012) articulates, “True community is not about including the disabled into the able-bodied world but reimagining community where difference is essential to wholeness” (p. 75).

Embracing interdependence can lead to structural and spiritual transformation within congregations. This includes developing inclusive ministries, empowering disabled leaders, and fostering spiritual friendships marked by reciprocity. It shifts the narrative from “helping the disabled” to “walking with one another in grace.” As such, interdependence becomes a sign of the Kingdom of God—a realm where the last are first, the weak are strong, and love binds all things together in unity.

To embrace disability as a theological gift is to affirm that God’s power is made perfect in weakness, that diversity reflects divine beauty, and that interdependence mirrors the communion of the Trinity. Through theological reorientation and practical inclusion, churches can become places of radical belonging, where all members are seen, valued, and empowered to participate fully in the life of the body of Christ. Rather than diminishing the church, disability enlarges its

Shannon Santiesteban

witness, deepens its compassion, and proclaims the gospel in ways that words alone cannot express.

Leading With Love and Justice

Creating a church that reflects the justice and compassion of Christ requires intentional training, leadership development, and the elevation of marginalized voices, especially those of individuals with disabilities. Inclusion in the church is not simply about compliance with legal standards or occasional gestures of welcome. It is an ongoing spiritual and communal practice that requires love, humility, and shared responsibility.

Training for ushers, greeters, and church leadership is an essential step toward cultivating a hospitable environment. These individuals often represent the first point of contact for visitors and returning members, shaping the tone of community life. Their sensitivity and preparation can determine whether a person with a disability feels embraced or isolated. Training should go beyond logistical knowledge of ramps, accessible seating, or restrooms. It must also address the less visible aspects of disability, such as sensory, cognitive, and psychological conditions. A pastoral approach to training involves helping volunteers understand the lived realities of various disabilities and fostering interpersonal skills that reflect Christ's compassion—such as listening before acting, using respectful language, and offering help without assuming dependency.

Church leadership must also commit to ongoing education on disability inclusion. This involves recognizing how ableism and unconscious biases can shape church practices in ways that exclude or marginalize. Education should include not only legal understanding of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) but also a theological exploration of justice as rooted in Scripture. Leviticus 19:14, for example, commands God's people not to place stumbling blocks

Shannon Santiesteban

before the blind, symbolizing the broader call to remove barriers to belonging. Likewise, Jesus' ministry demonstrates profound attentiveness to those society often overlooks (Luke 14:13–14). Disability inclusion, then, is not merely a technical adjustment—it is a theological imperative grounded in Christ's example of radical hospitality.

Representation in leadership and decision-making is a crucial, yet often overlooked, dimension of inclusion. The integrity of any accessibility initiative depends on whether people with disabilities are part of the planning, review, and leadership processes. Without representation, churches risk perpetuating exclusion through well-intentioned but misinformed policies. By contrast, when individuals with disabilities have a voice in shaping programs and priorities, the church embodies the model described in 1 Corinthians 12:22–26, where the weaker members are declared indispensable and worthy of special honor. This kind of representation is not symbolic—it is strategic and spiritually formative. It fosters community ownership, enhances the relevance of church programs, and affirms the spiritual leadership of those often ignored.

Such leadership includes contributions to worship planning, educational curricula, and outreach ministries. It also extends to broader theological conversations about the nature of grace, suffering, and embodiment. When people with disabilities are fully included, the church more accurately reflects the diversity and interdependence of the body of Christ. Their presence challenges prevailing assumptions about strength and value, and brings into focus new expressions of discipleship, perseverance, and hope.

Testimonies and storytelling are powerful tools for shifting congregational culture. Personal narratives invite others to see disability through the lens of lived faith rather than pity or fear. When individuals with disabilities share their experiences—whether through sermons,

Shannon Santiesteban

interviews, multimedia, or informal settings—they help reframe disability as a theological and communal gift. These stories not only humanize the issue but also highlight the need for structural change. Hearing about moments of exclusion or profound welcome provides a prophetic critique that can spark collective transformation.

Storytelling is reciprocal. It affirms the humanity and spirituality of disabled members while enriching the theological imagination of the congregation. It allows the church to witness how God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9) and to celebrate the diversity of gifts at work in the community. In theological education, testimonies can serve as primary texts, illuminating how God's grace intersects with physical limitations, mental health challenges, and societal barriers.

The church's mission statement plays a formative role in this journey toward justice. An explicitly inclusive mission signals a deep and enduring commitment to accessibility and equity. For instance, a church might proclaim: "Rooted in the love and justice of Christ, we seek to be a fully accessible and inclusive church where people of all abilities participate in worship, leadership, fellowship, and service." Such a statement captures both theological grounding and practical aspiration. It communicates that disability inclusion is not a secondary concern, but integral to the church's identity and calling.

Crafting this kind of statement requires collaboration and discernment. Churches should engage members with disabilities in the writing process, ensuring that the final language reflects lived realities and theological clarity. The mission should draw on biblical foundations—such as Micah 6:8's call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God—and set clear priorities for future action. When publicly shared, the mission statement becomes a source of both

Shannon Santiesteban

inspiration and accountability, guiding decisions, allocating resources, and fostering an atmosphere of welcome.

Leading with love and justice demands more than policies or symbolic gestures. It involves building systems and relationships that reflect the kingdom of God—a realm where all are welcomed, all are needed, and all are transformed. As churches embrace this call, they move closer to Christ's vision of community, where no one is overlooked and everyone belongs.

Summarizing The Creation of an Inclusive Church

Welcoming All: Creating an Inclusive Church for People with Disabilities is a comprehensive theological, legal, and pastoral guide for cultivating disability inclusion within Christian congregations. Grounded in biblical texts such as Genesis 1:27, 1 Corinthians 12:22 - 26, and John 9:1 - 3, this work asserts that individuals with disabilities bear the imago Dei (image of God) and are indispensable members of the Body of Christ. Rather than viewing disability through a medical or deficit-based lens, the text advances social and theological models of disability that emphasize dignity, justice, and mutual belonging.

This work addresses a broad spectrum of disabilities—including physical, dynamic, neurodivergent, and chronic illnesses—while examining the social and spiritual barriers often perpetuated in ecclesial settings. Drawing from contemporary disability theology (Eiesland, 1994; Brock, 2019; Hardwick, 2021), it challenges churches to move from accommodation to celebration by embracing interdependence, universal design, and the lived experiences of disabled individuals.

Shannon Santiesteban

Legal frameworks such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are evaluated alongside the ethical call for radical hospitality, particularly in light of biblical mandates to care for the marginalized (Isaiah 1:17; Matthew 25:40). Practical chapters guide churches in assessing architectural accessibility, providing communication accommodations (e.g., ASL interpretation, sensory-friendly spaces), and equipping leaders through training, representation, and storytelling.

By integrating scriptural exegesis, legal awareness, and pastoral care, this resource calls the Church to become not merely ADA-compliant, but gospel-shaped—reflecting Christ's love through inclusive worship, leadership, and fellowship. Ultimately, this book affirms that people with disabilities are not only welcome in the Church—they are essential to its wholeness and witness.

Shannon Santiesteban

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Shannon Santiesteban

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Shannon Santiesteban

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Shannon Santiesteban